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# SABOTAGING DANIEL WEBSTER

George B. Forgie

**Irving H. Bartlett**, *Daniel Webster*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1978. 333 pp. Notes and index. \$12.95.

**Charles M. Wiltse**, ed. *The Papers of Daniel Webster: Correspondence*. Vol. 1, 1798-1824, Harold D. Moser, associate editor. xxv + 518 pp. Vol. 2, 1825-1829, Harold D. Moser, associate editor. xxiv + 563 pp. Vol. 3, 1830-1834, David G. Allen, assistant editor. xxvi + 547 pp. Hanover, N.H.: The University Press of New England, 1974, 1976, 1977. Annotations, illustrations, and indexes. \$22.50 each.

Most biographers of Daniel Webster have written in thrall to his reputation among his contemporaries as a Great Man. Even in assessments of his character and career written by people who loathed him, the point of departure has almost always been awe. Webster comes into view as a colossus, moving with great self-assurance and formidable talents to important (although sometimes ethereal or technical) accomplishments in law, politics, diplomacy, and oratory. He influenced alike judicial and popular understanding of the Constitution, seeing and explaining more clearly than anyone else how institutions inherited from the founders could accommodate, with nationalizing effect, the fundamental economic and demographic changes of the nineteenth century. So persistently and persuasively did he inculcate devotion to the Union, telling Americans that they must preserve it in order to secure anything else that mattered, that his teachings may have contributed—who can be sure?—to delaying its breakup and making it temporary when it finally did come.

But if there is much in the record that sustains Webster's reputation, there is also much that conflicts with it. For all his accomplishments, Webster was in several respects a bystander to, and victim of, important historical change. Although a visible and influential politician, he was not importantly involved in the leading political development of his time, the emergence of the modern party system. His commitment to the Whigs as the vessel of his political ambitions came late and reluctantly, and in his view was never much more than provisional. Relying too heavily on personal reputation as a substitute

for organization, he sought the presidency futilely in six campaigns from 1832 to 1852, when death was palpably approaching his door. He opposed territorial expansion, without effect. He failed dramatically in his attempt to find a position on slavery extension that would be acceptable everywhere, winning obloquy in the increasingly antislavery North without gaining a compensatory trust in the increasingly insecure South.

Far from appearing forcefully triumphant to a modern observer, Webster's career takes shape as a series of occasions, at once desultory and repetitive. He tended to do things twice. There were two sets of terms in the House of Representatives (from two different states) and two in the Senate; two appointments as secretary of state; two appearances at Bunker Hill; two great speeches for the Constitution and the Union. In each case the impact he made was greater the first time than the second. Nothing he did afterwards seems as important or memorable as his debate with Robert Y. Hayne in 1830. Yet anticlimax is as imprecise as it is dramatically unsatisfying as a structuring device for his career. In Webster's life something went awry before 1830. Some force deflected the trajectory of his career even as it described a rising arc.

One can see throughout Webster's life a striking interplay between talents and vices. He eulogized the virtues of the founders as crucial to the creation of the republic and insisted that the future of the Union depended on the virtue of its citizens; yet he often flouted the virtues he insisted his generation cherish. He declared that political leaders should be men of principle who stood above—while they attempted to harmonize—conflicting interests; yet he was erratic in his own policy positions to the point that even his friends did not trust him, keeping him supplied with cash on the grounds that otherwise he might sell his prodigious abilities to their adversaries. He presented himself as an expert in public finance, explaining clearly and persuasively the economic advantages of protective tariffs and the Bank of the United States; yet he was unable to achieve even a rudimentary prudence with his own finances. He accepted money from people who hoped to benefit from his access to power. When those sums were gone he borrowed more and lived out his days in a pit of debt. Finally, he took few pains to hide his excesses from public view, so that as his fame increased, so did his reputation as a lazy, pleasure-seeking wastrel whose talents were for sale.

Webster's failures and weaknesses have never been ignored, but there is no biography that successfully integrates the disparate qualities of his character. Biographers have tended to proceed as though they were dealing with two different beings co-existing rather easily inside a single powerful man. In this respect the tone and explanatory power of Webster scholarship have not gotten much beyond William Lowndes Yancey's observation in

1846 that Webster had "two characters, which, Proteus-like, he can assume, as his interests or necessities demand—the 'God-like' and the 'Hell-like'—the 'God-like Daniel,' and '*Black Dan*'!"<sup>1</sup>

What were the springs of his complex nature? The ongoing project sponsored by Dartmouth College to publish *The Papers of Daniel Webster* provides important clues. Although the editors do not fully escape the custom among students of Webster to confuse eulogy with scholarship (one of the obvious purposes here is to create a monument to the man), this does not prevent the series from clearing new paths for Webster interpretation. Enough of Webster's papers survive to fill perhaps a hundred letterpress volumes. For reasons of expense and time the editors plan to publish only the most important portions of the record, in fourteen volumes—a modest number as such enterprises go. Three volumes of correspondence have now appeared; four more will follow. There will be two volumes of speeches and formal writings by Webster, two of his diplomatic, and three of his legal, papers. Some of the elections in the volumes now available probably will provoke second-guessing, and readers who sense a peremptory quality in the editors' assurance that they know best in this area will not be mistaken, but no matter. Largely as a result of the editors' own directing efforts, virtually all Webster materials known to survive have been gathered, arranged, and made available on microfilm. (The central collection was issued on forty-one reels by University Microfilms in 1971.) The printed letters are accompanied by a calendar listing and describing the rest of the microfilmed correspondence. This is just one of many features that enhance the usefulness of this series. Short essays by the editors at the start of each volume and at pivotal points in the correspondence, annotations that are supportive but never officious, chronologies, and illustrations—all these combine to orient the reader securely in Webster's world and direct him toward the vaster riches available on the microfilm reels.

Revelations about Webster's character emerge in part from the editorial decision to publish his correspondence separately from his public papers, and first. The disadvantage of this plan is that it cuts off the triumphant public moments of his life from their private roots, intensifying the already fragmented sense of Webster that his long, diverse career conveys. The correspondence volumes show Webster preparing the Dartmouth College case and revising his first Bunker Hill oration after delivering it, but the presentations themselves are deferred to later volumes.

The correspondence is in any case a curious choice for the opening volumes, for whatever Webster's claims to greatness may be, not even his admirers would be likely to make a case for his letters, which have been frequently characterized as commonplace and therefore unrevealing. But

if the letters in their banality are overshadowed by the editorial treatment they receive and thus undermine the very monument they are intended to support, they also ironically bring us closer to Webster's character than we have been before. Readers can observe him in moments of euphoria, grief, and boredom. The letters show that he could be by turns high-minded, petty, tactful, impatient, sarcastic, generous, antic, and mean. We see him exploiting his friends, but sense readily that he was nonetheless devoted to them. We see the growth of his intense interest in even the smallest details concerning the development of Marshfield, his Massachusetts estate. We see him flailing in the quicksand of his finances. Webster's letters are revealing enough. What they reveal is that he was in many respects an utterly ordinary man.

Irving Bartlett's *Daniel Webster* is the first full-length biography in which Webster is reduced to human size, but at least part of this effect is achieved inadvertently. Far from awed by Webster, Bartlett seems to have lost interest in his project long before he completed it. His research is thorough in the Webster papers, but ranges outside them scarcely at all, with the result that we do not get to see Webster moving in front of the mirror of his time. The book is disfigured by small errors appearing with such frequency that they are likely to deflect the concentration of even the most absorbed and sympathetic reader. There are errors of transcription (quotations from Gamaliel Bradford, p. 9; and Emerson, p. 266), fact (Webster was offered a court clerkship in New Hampshire in 1805, not 1803, and replied to Hayne in 1830, not 1829; the famous collapse of the speakers' platform in the 1840 campaign occurred at Saratoga, not Syracuse), vocabulary ("Anglophiles" [p. 191], when he means the opposite), spelling (the first name of Abbott Lawrence is misspelled throughout), and typography (dozens, from the beginning to the end).

Bartlett's interest lies less with the details of Webster's external life, about which he is often perfunctory, than with his character and its bearing on his career and reputation. He is intrigued particularly with Webster's vices—his "willingness to tolerate a certain looseness with the truth in matters of his own convenience" (p. 41), his laziness and sensuality, and his license, especially with money. Bartlett does not dismiss these traits as eccentric or overemphasize them as fiendish. Instead he connects them, along with the strengths of Webster's character, to his lifelong desire both to please and remain close to his father, the "dominant influence" in his life.

A New Hampshire farmer and tavernkeeper, Ebenezer Webster fought in the French and Indian War and the Revolution and participated in the nationalizing politics of the 1780s. For all that, he remained a figure of limited means and local influence who believed greater roles were barred by

his deficient education. In Daniel the father recognized an agent for the vicarious fulfillment of his own ambitions; he singled him out, sacrificed for him, and let him know it and why. To his son, Ebenezer Webster was a paradoxical figure who had done everything yet had not amounted to very much. Daniel was asked in effect to see his father as the George Washington of the Webster family, as Bartlett puts it, and then urged to improve on the model. Bartlett believes that Webster's love for his father shaped his character in conflicting ways. On the one hand, his ambition to succeed, which took form as an endless quest for the presidency and material gain, proceeded from an intense desire to "earn the approval of his dead father" (p. 208). On the other hand, Bartlett sees Webster's lifelong reliance on the help of others as an extension of his dependency on the father he saw as powerful and towering.

There is much evidence that can be arranged to support the idea that the influence of Ebenezer Webster upon his son was extraordinary. Daniel Webster spoke frequently of his father with respect and gratitude, admitting he could not think of him "without turning child again" (*Papers*, 1:10). Of his mother he spoke scarcely at all. The problem is not that there is nothing in the record to sustain Bartlett's assertion but rather that he does not adequately develop the possibilities it contains or deal with the problems it raises. For one thing, although Bartlett vividly establishes both the weaknesses in Webster's character and his intense love for his father, nowhere does he supply any reason for connecting the weaknesses to the love. The more general proposition about Webster's dependency—that he did not want to give up "the warmth and security of childhood" (p. 11)—is less arbitrary, but (as it is said to be true of everyone) also less informative.

Next, it is not clear why Ebenezer Webster, a man according to Bartlett of "unquestioned integrity" (p. 209), should have been expected by his son to approve of power and success achieved at the cost of the son's integrity. (Psychoanalytic explanations in order to be useful must go beyond common sense but in order to be credible they ought not assault it.) Finally, Bartlett appears to miss the irony his presentation permits his readers to see: that the way Webster attempted to fulfill his father's ambitions contributed heavily to undermining his own career and preventing those ambitions from being realized.

Just as awe of Webster has always shaped assessments of Webster, so it shaped Webster himself. He was hailed from the start—singled out because of his intelligence and attractiveness and boosted by a series of Federalist patrons beginning with his father. Most of the time Webster met the tests others set for him. In other matters, big and small, he did not. The point is that the tests were so often set by others. Two dominant themes of Webster's

"Autobiography" (an essay, printed in the *Papers*, 1: 3-24, he wrote in middle-age) are the ways his path in life was laid out by others (he once told a friend it was his father's wish, not his own, that he become a lawyer) and his love of play, which he admitted did not end with his boyhood. Seen together with other clues, these statements suggest Webster's ambition was as much thrust upon him (whereupon greatness followed) as deeply internal. In certain ways Webster resisted this imposed role and attempted to get outside the rising monument as though he realized it was not himself. Sent by his father to Phillips Exeter Academy to begin his rise in the world, he who would become perhaps the greatest American orator developed an incapacitating stage fright whenever asked to declaim. This was the first of a series of failures that shared two conspicuous characteristics: they showed up at the points of his greatest putative strengths, and they took place in public, so that his humiliation was accompanied and compounded by public astonishment.

Used in combination, the Webster papers and Bartlett's investigation of his character provide a basis for seeing Webster as not just ambitiously pursuing but also fighting his own advance every step of the way. They make it plausible to suppose that Webster's vices were indeed basic but that they were less evidence of a lifelong dependence on his father than they were a means of frustrating his father's goals. They make it possible to see that in addition to wanting to please his father, Webster wanted to get even with him, and found a way to do it by sabotaging his own career. He set out the traps that ensnared himself, openly and with evident method from his youth to the last year of his life.

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1. *Congressional Globe*, 29 Cong., 1st sess. (April 10, 1846), p. 653.